

# How to Teach Your Children About the Holocaust

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My grandfather was a Holocaust survivor. When he was 10 years old, his parents sent him and his two older sisters out of Germany to live with non-Jewish families in Sweden to escape Nazi persecution. After two years, my grandfather and his siblings were lucky to be reunited with their parents as refugees in America. Last year, I had the privilege of sharing his story in the documentary *The Starfish*. My grandfather passed away months after the film's debut.

As a third-generation survivor, the Holocaust is an important part of my family's history. I don't remember the first time I learned about the genocide of 6 million European Jews during World War II, but I do remember the impact it had on me at a young age. I remember thinking about how large the number of Jewish victims was. I also remember how reading *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* in elementary school made me realize that children were amongst the victims.

Unfortunately, it does not seem that everyone in my generation has learned about the Holocaust and its impact on the world and the Jewish community like I did. A [2020 survey](#) of Americans between the ages of 18 and 39 found that 23 percent of respondents said they believed the Holocaust was a myth, or had been exaggerated. Nearly half of all respondents said they have seen Holocaust denial or distortion posts on social media or elsewhere online. And worst of all: 1 in 8 (12 percent) said they had definitely not heard or didn't think they had heard about the Holocaust.

### Documenting My Grandfather's Experience of the Holocaust Taught Me About the Resilience of Fatherhood

As a 30-year-old, I find it numbing to think such a significant percentage of my generation, as well as Gen Zers, could be this misled or poorly educated on the Holocaust. As a parent, it makes me even more concerned for how my children and their peers will be educated on the events of the Holocaust. The one good thing to come out of the recent survey: 80 percent of all respondents believe it is important to continue teaching about the Holocaust so it does not happen again, and 64 percent believe Holocaust education should be compulsory in schools. Now it's time for parents and educators to step up.

"As a country, there is always more we can do," says Thorin Tritter, Ph.D., museum and programming director at the [Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center of Nassau County \(HMTC\)](#) in Glen Cove, New York. "And given there is no nationwide mandate, students' Holocaust education experiences vary widely from state to state ... When it comes to helping to educate their children about the Holocaust, I would suggest parents be engaged in what their child is reading and watching. I'd encourage them to then talk to their children about what they are experiencing and why, as well as check the sources that their children are turning to."

While my kids are 3 and 2 and both too young to begin the conversation about what transpired during the Holocaust, it's something I've begun thinking of after this recent survey has exposed the lack of proper Holocaust education in this country. I'd like to trust the school systems to implement proper education and for it not be something only discussed in Jewish households, but I know it will be important for my wife and I to be able to have these hard educational discussions at home as well. Here's how experts suggest parents and educators talk about the Holocaust with kids in school and at home.



Tyler Gildin's grandfather and his family in 1937, two years before the children left for Sweden.  
Courtesy of Tyler Gildin

## Teach Beyond the Facts

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"The Holocaust is more than a history lesson—it's a lesson in human behavior that resonates today," says Jane Fossner Pashman, the program director of UJA-Federation's Witness Project, a program that pairs students with Holocaust survivors.

Of course, kids need to learn and grasp the historical context of when and why the Holocaust took place, but teaching about the Holocaust needs to go even deeper than just the facts. Experts say around early adolescence is an appropriate time for parents to offer details about the Holocaust and discuss hate, discrimination, and prejudice.

[Third Graders Were Told To Reenact Horrific Scenes From the Holocaust—That Is Not How You Teach History.](#)

## Formal Education Can Start in Middle School

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"Generally speaking, it is around the seventh grade that students are developmentally able to think critically about their identity and how it shapes their choices," says Jeremy Nesoff, the director of district partnerships and interim director of the Jewish education department at [Facing History and Ourselves](#). The global nonprofit organization's mission is to use lessons of history to challenge teachers and their students to stand up to bigotry and hate. "We train

and support teachers to use a developmentally appropriate historical case study method that leads students to wrestling with some of the most fundamental questions about human behavior and history."

Books and movies are useful tools for teachers to use to introduce the Holocaust in the classroom. *Maus*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel series by Art Spiegelman, which uses visuals of Jewish people as mice and Nazis as cats to recount his family's experience during the Holocaust, is often required reading in high school classrooms. However, [a school board in Tennessee voted to ban \*Maus\* from being taught in classrooms](#) in January 2022. The school board pointed to "objectionable language" in the book, according to the minutes of the meeting.

On January 26, the day before Holocaust Memorial Day, [the U.S. Holocaust Museum tweeted](#), "Teaching about the Holocaust using books like *Maus* can inspire students to think critically about the past and their own roles and responsibilities today."

Spiegelman published the first volume *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale*, in 1986. He followed up with the second volume, *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began*, in 1991.

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— Thorin Tritter, Ph.D., museum and programming director at HMTTC

## Have Tough Conversations at Home

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"There are emotional challenges of learning about the Holocaust," says Dr. Tritter. "We are always very concerned about the fact that we are exposing children to a level of evil that they may not have contemplated before, and that learning about the specifics of a genocidal plan is very different than learning math or spelling or most other topics taught in school." Having these hard conversations about our global history can play a big role in raising moral and compassionate children.

Parents should also emphasize the importance of speaking up against injustice. "We need to help them to understand the role of the bystander and what it means to speak out and use your voice," says Pashman. "And we ultimately need them to learn about the power of hope."

## Teach Kids to Sort Through Misinformation

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Misinformation has become such a major factor in shaping some offensive and hateful beliefs. Despite the evidence, photographs, films, and museums dedicated to ensuring people never forget the horrific atrocities that took place during the Holocaust, there are still those who intentionally circulate falsities on social media outlets in the hopes of intentionally

misleading people. It's critical to teach children that they will come across inaccuracies about the Holocaust online, especially on social media, and instill the importance of fact-checking whatever they read.

Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg had previously struggled to determine what was deemed freedom of speech versus harmful anti-Semitic rhetoric, but has more recently announced that they will be banning all existing and prohibiting all future content related to denying or distorting the Holocaust. "My own thinking has evolved as I've seen data showing an increase in anti-Semitic violence, as have our wider policies on hate speech," Zuckerberg wrote in a [Facebook post](#) in October 2020.

[How to Teach Kids to Spot Fake News](#)

## Help Kids Never Forget

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I am so grateful that I was able to capture my grandfather's Holocaust story in my documentary, *The Starfish*, before he passed, and that it's something I can share with my children one day when they're old enough to view the film. While my grandfather and his two sisters were incredibly fortunate to have been aided by the organization [HIAS](#), the world's oldest refugee protection agency, there were so many other children and families who perished and should never be forgotten.

Never forgetting is two-fold, as we should remember those whose lives were lost, but also learn from the past to make sure something like this never happens again. Looking to the national survey again, 59 percent of respondents said they do believe something like the Holocaust could happen again. With education that could change.

"One of the things we often say at HIAS is that, 'Never again has to mean never again for everyone,'" says Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer, the rabbi-in-residence of HIAS. "So, if we constantly say to our children in religious school, 'Never again,' we then have to educate them not just about the Holocaust, but about the ways that people continue to be oppressed and have their lives endangered because of who they are."

This will also help children understand "how to root out the hatred that escalates into genocidal violence," Grant Meyer adds.

[How to Wipe Out Prejudices Before They Start](#)

We need to help them to understand the role of the bystander and what it means to speak out and use your voice. And ultimately the power of hope.

— Jane Fossner Pashman, the program director of UJA-Federation's Witness Project

## Encourage Engagement

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Seek out organizations that focus on sharing survivor's stories with the next generation and host events at your local schools and community centers. The UJA's Witness Project, for example, is a program that brings students into the homes of Holocaust survivors on a bi-weekly basis. The program culminates with a live performance where the teenagers act out the survivor's story in the first person.

"What I love about the Witness Project is that we form relationships with survivors and get to know them as people," says Pashman. "We hear about their lives before and after the Holocaust and talk about their careers, their hobbies, and their grandchildren."

Another great way to educate your children is to bring them to a museum or exhibit focused on the Holocaust. "There is something powerful about standing in an exhibition and engaging in both an inquiry into history and a reflective look at oneself through this topic," says Dr. Tritter. "These are places and institutions that can help guide students through this difficult and upsetting topic, providing students and their families with a more thoughtful and more rewarding experience than most teachers can provide in the classroom."

*Tyler Gildin is a director, producer, and creative, but most importantly a dad of two kids. He directed and produced the documentary The Starfish that tells his grandfather's Holocaust story, and is now available on Apple TV, Amazon Prime Video, and several other streaming services. He currently hosts the Father Material, a podcast focused on exploring how fatherhood impacts one's creative process and path. You can follow his almost daily updates on balancing being a creative and a dad on Twitter.*